

Informal learning: theory, practice and experience

Informal learning: theory, practice and experience. In recent years a number of researchers and policy pundits have rediscovered 'informal learning'. But is there really such a thing? We explore the theory and practice of 'informal learning'

Informal learning should no longer be regarded as an inferior form of learning whose main purpose is to act as the precursor of formal learning; it needs to be seen as fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right, at times directly relevant to employment and at other times not relevant at all. (Coffield 2000: 8)

We must move away from a view of education as a rite of passage involving the acquisition of enough knowledge and qualifications to acquire an adult station in life. The point of education should not be to inculcate a body of knowledge, but to develop capabilities: the basic ones of literacy and numeracy as well as the capability to act responsibly towards others, to take initiative and to work creatively and collaboratively. The most important capability, and the one which traditional education is worst at creating is the ability and yearning to carry on learning. Too much schooling kills off a desire to learn.... Schools and universities should become more like hubs of learning, within the community, capable of extending into the community... More learning needs to be done at home, in offices and kitchens, in the contexts where knowledge is deployed to solve problems and add value to people's lives. (Leadbeater 2000: 111-112)

Introduction

Commentators in the UK adult education and lifelong learning field have shown an increasing interest in informal learning. Bentley (1998) has examined 'learning beyond the classroom'; Coffield (2000) 'the necessity of informal learning'; Marsick and Watkins (1990) and Dale and Bell (1999) 'informal and incidental learning in the workplace'; and McGivney (1999) 'informal learning in the community'. However, this interest has not been reflected in any significant way thus far in policy statements and reviews. As Coffield (2000: 1) notes, for all the talk of [lifelong learning](#) and the [learning society](#) the focus remains on formal provision, qualifications and accountability.

This interest in informal learning has run alongside developments in thinking around [informal education](#) (although, significantly, there is no reference to this in any of the above studies). It also links to explorations of learning through participation in the life of a group or association – [la vie associative](#). Within social anthropology there has also been a longstanding concern with 'informal learning' – reflected in studies such as Heath on literacy practices (1983) and Henze (1992). These have fed through into thinking about practice (Heath and McLaughlin 1993 and Smith 1994). Work on the distributed cognition (Salomon 1993) and situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) has also helped to deepen our appreciation.

While it is surely right to explore and deepen 'learning beyond the classroom', there is some doubt as to whether the notion of informal learning is the most useful way forward. Michael Eraut, for example, has suggested that the utility of such a 'catch-all' label is not very great

(2000: 12). He suggests the notion of ‘non-formal learning’ might be more helpful. However, as we will see, it isn’t the most illuminating path either. Within much that is written and said about the area, learning and education are confused; and there is an over-concern with institutional setting or sponsorship as against process and content.

In this piece I explore informal learning as an administrative concept; the competing claims of ‘non-formal education’; the significance of tacit knowledge; and the production of social knowledge through distributed and situated learning. I argue that the most useful way of exploring and developing what is a fundamental area of human endeavour, is to put ‘informal learning’ on one side for the moment and to focus on:

- learning in its various guises – implicit, reactive and deliberative, for example, and
- self-directed and communal forms of education.

The idea of ‘informal education’, I suggest, does have utility.

Informal learning – an administrative concept

We can begin to see some of the problems associated with the term ‘informal learning’ as soon as we glance at the definitions offered. For example, Veronica McGivney used the following in her study. Informal learning is:

- Learning that takes place outside a dedicated learning environment and which arises from the activities and interests of individuals and groups, but which may not be recognised as learning.
- Non course-based learning activities (which might include discussion, talks or presentations, information, advice and guidance) provided or facilitated in response to expressed interests and needs by people from a range of sectors and organizations (health, housing, social services, employment services, education and training services, guidance services).
- Planned and structured learning such as short courses organized in response to identified interests and needs but delivered in flexible and informal ways and in informal community settings.

Margaret Dale and John Bell (1999) define informal learning somewhat more narrowly for their purposes as:

Learning which takes place in the work context, relates to an individual’s performance of their job and/or their employability, and which is not formally organized into a programme or curriculum by the employer. It may be recognized by the different parties involved, and may or may not be specifically encouraged.

The central and defining feature of informal learning in this view is context – or more accurately administrative setting and sponsorship. Crudely, learning that takes place in dedicated educational institutions such as schools is seen as formal, that which occurs beyond the school walls as ‘informal’. Coombs and Ahmed used a similar distinction with regard to education. In their view, informal education is:

... the lifelong process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitude of families and friends; from travel, reading

newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally informal education is unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional at times, yet accounts for the great bulk of any person's total lifetime learning – including that of a highly 'schooled' person. (Coombs and Ahmed 1974: 8)

We can see the similarities here with the above discussion of 'informal learning'. Significantly, it carries with it many of the same problems. Informal education is set against non-formal education – organized educational activity outside formal systems; and formal education – the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded 'education system'. The distinction made is largely administrative. Formal education is linked with schools and training institutions; non-formal with community groups and other organizations; and informal covers what is left, e.g. interactions with friends, family and work colleagues.

There is an important point for policy in this distinction. If schools and colleges have only a limited place in the learning that occurs in a society, questions must be asked about the focus on such institutions. Would funding be better deployed elsewhere? Does the current obsession with accreditation have any merit? Should researchers explore learning in everyday life in more depth? However, once this point is noted, there is little conceptual mileage in this particular division of learning.

The main problem with regard to theoretical development is that as soon as we begin to look at the characteristics of learning activities within 'dedicated' and non-dedicated learning environments we find a striking mix of educational and learning processes in each (Smith 1988: 125-126). For example, as Henze and others have shown, people teach and organize educational events as part of their everyday experience. A grandfather might show a child how to use a key to unlock a door; a mother may work with her daughter around reading – and so on. These educational events fall inside McGivney's first focus – yet in their essence they may be little different to what happens in a classroom. Both grandfather and mother may set out to teach particular skills. For this reason, any discussion of informal and formal learning, or informal and formal education must move beyond a simple focus on context or setting, and look to the processes and experiences involved in each. In the case of the latter, it can be argued that informal education is largely driven by conversation (and has formal interludes), while formal education is curriculum-driven (and has informal interludes). Setting or context is still a factor. Different settings will offer a novel mix of resources and opportunities for learning and will have contrasting expectations associated with them (Jeffs and Smith 1990: 1-23).

A further issue is that many of those commentating on informal learning do not seem to make an adequate distinction between learning and education. The latter can be characterized as setting out to foster environments for learning that involve a commitment to certain values such as a respect for truth and for persons (Jeffs and Smith 1999: 12-16 – see [education](#)). **Learning** can be seen as a product or thing – a memory or understanding; or as a process – as a form of thinking. What is sometimes described as informal learning is, thus, better described as self-education, or self directed learning. ([Alan Tough](#) has explored people's [participation in learning projects](#). He began by calling this phenomenon 'self-teaching', later [self-directed learning](#).)

'Non-formal' learning as implicit, reactive and deliberative

Michael Eraut has contributed one of the most helpful discussions of 'informal learning' in recent years. He suggests, but doesn't really make the case for, a focus on non-formal learning. The argument is that the term 'informal' is associated with so many other features of situations – such as dress, behaviour, discourse – 'that its colloquial application as a descriptor of learning contexts may have little to do with learning per se' (Eraut 2000: 12). Unfortunately, the notion of 'non-formal learning' in itself may not be any more helpful.

Firstly, we cannot ignore the tradition of thinking and administrative practice associated with non-formal education as it will tend to colour the way many professionals in the lifelong learning and adult education arena will approach the notion. Non-formal education in its classic definition by Coombs and Ahmed (1974: 8) is 'any organized, systematic educational activity, carried on outside the framework of the formal system, to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children'. It includes agricultural extension programmes, youth clubs and groups with substantial educational purposes and community-based programmes of health education. As Malcolm Tight notes, a simpler definition has been employed by OECD as: 'education for which none of the learners is enrolled or registered' (OECD 1977: 11, quoted by Tight 1996: 69). Such activity could be course-based or more conversational – and would run close to the second and third elements of informal learning identified by McGivney (above). This is a narrow interpretation of the territory that Eraut seeks to explore and has the danger of focusing us again on the administrative context rather than the characteristics of the learning process.

Secondly, the use of the term 'non-formal' invites dualism. We inevitably tend to contrast it with 'formal' learning. This is learning that takes place in a situation where there is:

- A prescribed learning framework;
- An organized learning event or package;
- The presence of a designated teacher or trainer;
- The award of a qualification or credit;
- The external specification of outcomes. (Eraut 2000: 12).

We may well want to question this characterization of formal learning, but presumably non-formal learning could be seen as involving a non-prescribed learning framework, internal or non-specification of outcome, no designated teachers and so on. The point that Eraut seeks to make is that we need to explore the full range of learning processes or modes that fall within the domain of 'non-formal learning'. Here he is surely right in trying to point us in the direction of processes and experiences but in so doing he undermines the case for a distinction between non-formal and formal. Some of the very processes he directs our attention to could equally be labelled 'formal'. It would seem that a focus on setting or context (informal, non-formal and formal) has only a limited usefulness – and then principally in the broad discussion of policy.

Eraut's argument gets interesting when he begins to look at the level of intention in learning. He creates a continuum with implicit learning – 'the acquisition of knowledge independently of conscious attempts to learn and the absence of explicit knowledge about what was learned' (Reber 1993 quoted by Eraut 2000: 12) on one extreme. On the other is deliberative learning where time is specifically set-aside for learning. Between the two is reactive learning. Here learning is explicit but almost takes place spontaneously and in response to recent, current or

imminent situations but without any time being set aside for it. These categories come very close to [Donald Schön's](#) categories 'knowledge in use', '[reflection on action](#)' and reflection in action. (Eraut 1994 views Schön's last category as problematic because he believes it is also sometimes used to refer to a metacognitive awareness that is not a form of learning in itself). He asks a further question – are the events that provide the focus from the past, something happening in the present, or part of some possible future action? He then suggests that we can then produce a typology on 'non-formal learning'.

Michael Eraut's typology of non-formal learning (2000: 13)			
Time of stimulus	Implicit learning	Reactive learning	Deliberative learning
Past episode(s)	Implicit linkage of past memories with current experience	Brief near-spontaneous reflection on past episodes, communications, events, experiences.	Review of past actions, communications, events' experiences. More systematic reflection.
Current experience	A selection from experience enters the memory.	Incidental noting of facts, opinions, impressions, ideas. Recognition of learning opportunities.	Engagement in decision making, problem solving, planned informal learning.
Future behaviour	Unconscious effect of previous experiences.	Being prepared for emergent learning opportunities.	Planned learning goals. Planned learning opportunities.

This presentation is useful as soon as we unhook it from the notion of 'non-formal learning'. Eraut dismisses using the idea of self-directed learning because it can refer to what he has defined as formal and non-formal situations. However, so can his notion of deliberative learning. Indeed, implicit and reactive learning can also do so. As Eraut (2000: 26) admits, a multitude of processes and outcomes occur in formal settings like lessons in schools (as they do in informal moments like chance meetings on the street). It is probably more useful to look at learning as implicit, reactive and deliberative (plus some other possible candidates) and to explore interaction with context. Effectively, this would mean going well beyond a crude separation of contexts into informal and formal. The focus on these more substantive categories of learning allows us to connect with substantial traditions of thinking and practice and so develop a better appreciation of the experiences of learners and how their efforts might be enhanced.

Tacit knowledge

Another path into the notion of informal learning is to view it simply as implicit learning. Such learning results in what Polanyi (1967) calls *tacit knowledge* – ‘that which we know but cannot tell’. However, as Eraut (2000: 16) again points out, a string of writers have explored how what they talk of as tacit knowledge can be made explicit (and how explicit learning can lead to tacit knowledge). It may be that no knowledge is totally implicit or explicit. Much of Eraut’s discussion of ‘non-formal learning’ is concerned with identifying different types of situation in which tacit knowledge may be gained or used (simultaneously or otherwise). Six main situations were named:

- knowledge acquired by implicit learning of which the knower is unaware;
- knowledge constructed from the aggregation of episodes in long-term memory;
- knowledge inferred by observers to be capable of representation as implicit theories of action, personal constructs, schemas, etc;
- knowledge that enables rapid, intuitive understanding or response;
- knowledge entailed in transferring knowledge from one situation to another;
- knowledge embedded in taken-for-granted activities, perceptions and norms (2000: 28).

Tacit knowledge provides much of the basis for the way we interact with people and situations. We have a ‘taken-for-granted’ understanding of others. Because this is not explored in any coherent way, such knowledge can be self-perpetuating and lead to behaviour that is inappropriate, or not the most productive. This is a compelling argument for the exploration of implicit learning (and attempting to make tacit knowledge more explicit). Once revealed it can be tested and developed. Not unexpectedly there are major difficulties with this process (see the discussion of [experiential learning](#) and [reflection on action](#)). Indeed, if we follow Polanyi’s definition it may not be possible at all.

We also need to recognize the reverse process – that of making explicit knowledge tacit. Here we may learn and develop routines and habits to deal with situations. This can range from developing the ability to touch-type to being able to respond to situations quickly – for example dealing with a medical emergency. In the case of the latter we may quickly fall into a pattern of actions without any significant deliberation. We respond to certain characteristics of a situation. Competence in a field depends on our abilities to both name and explore what could be described as ‘tacit knowledge’, and to ‘unthinkingly’ make use of it in appropriate circumstances.

From the brief discussion above it can be inferred that there is little mileage in simply renaming implicit learning as informal learning. First, there is a strong body of literature that deals explicitly and successfully with tacit knowledge – and it would seem pointless to re-label a phenomenon that has a comprehensive literature. Second, the production of tacit knowledge involves implicit, reactive and deliberative learning. To focus down on one of these is to miss a, perhaps ‘the’, significant point. It is the interrelation of these modes of learning, and the mix of informal and formal education, that demands our attention.

Situated learning

This leads on to a fourth avenue of exploration – viewing informal learning as an expression of situated learning (see [learning](#)). This takes us beyond understandings of learning as being internal, or ‘within the skin’, of individuals (see discussion of atomized notions of the [self](#))

towards an understanding that takes in the social. When looked at in conjunction with the processes Eraut outlined with respect to non-formal learning [above](#) powerful possibilities emerge.

A useful starting point is the notion of distributed cognition that gained some currency in the early 1990s. Much of the experimentation and theorizing concerning cognitive processes and development has treated cognition as being ‘possessed and residing in the heads of individuals’ (Salomon 1993: xii). Those interested in distributed cognition have looked to the tools and social relations ‘outside’ people’s heads. They are not only ‘sources of stimulation and guidance but are actually vehicles of thought... It is not just the “person-solo” who learns, but the “person-plus”, the whole system of interrelated factors’ (ibid.: xiii). People think in relationship with others and use various tools. Different cognitions will emerge in different situations.

So it is that we can talk of ‘situated learning’. It can be seen as involving participation in communities of practice.

Learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person. In this view, learning only partly – and often incidentally – implies becoming able to be involved in new activities, to perform new tasks and functions, to master new understandings. Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. (Lave and Wenger 1991: 53)

Novices enter at the edge – their participation is on the periphery. Gradually their engagement deepens and becomes more complex. They become full participants, and will often take on organizing or facilitative roles (see our discussion of learning in [associations](#)). Knowledge is, thus, located in the community of practice. Furthermore, in this view ‘it makes no sense to talk of knowledge that is decontextualized, abstract or general’ (Tennant 1997: 77).

Four propositions are common to the range of perspectives that now come together under the banner of situated learning:

1. High-level or expert knowledge and skill can be gained from everyday experiences at work, and in community or family.
2. Domain-specific knowledge is necessary for the development of expertise (i.e. much of expertise relies on detailed local knowledge of a workplace, locality or industry).
3. Learning is a social process.
4. Knowledge is embedded in practice and transformed through goal-directed behaviour. (Tennant 1999: 170).

From the above we can see how discussions of informal learning becomes linked with situated learning. The focus on communities of practice rather than dedicated learning environments; the interest in implicit learning; and the concern with relationship and conversation can lead us in that direction. In terms of the administrative or institutional definition of informal learning (see [above](#)) there is an immediate problem, however. We can approach learning that takes place in the community of practice that is the school as situated. Moreover, as with ‘tacit knowledge’, there is now a vibrant

literature that deals explicitly and successfully with situated learning – and it would be misleading to re-label the phenomenon.

Self-education and informal education

Thus far, the argument has been that the notion of informal learning only has a limited use as a means of highlighting the extent of learning and education activity beyond the school. As a basis upon which to develop significant theory or to deepen practice it has little to recommend it. Indeed, it could be argued that it diverts attention away from what are more productive lines of enquiry. The question inevitably arises – can a similar argument be made around the distinction between informal and formal education?

The answer is ‘Yes’, if we use definitions of informal, non-formal and formal education that draw upon the sort of administrative concerns articulated by Coombs and Ahmed (1974). However, if we look to a more sophisticated appreciation of informal and formal education, then the answer is ‘No’. The key dimension, in many respects, is intention. Education is a conscious activity; learning isn’t necessarily. People may not have a clear idea of the knowledge or skill they want to acquire, but they are committed to a process. This focus on intention in education allows us to explore different ways of organizing and articulating this. My own preference is to separate those approaches that depend upon the planning and sequencing of learning (via something like a curriculum) and those that are essentially dialogical or conversational (and hence hold little prospect of pre-organizing if we to stay true to their nature). The former can be seen as formal, and the latter as informal, education. As [John Elisha](#) has argued it is best to see these as a continuum (see below)

Street educators probably work more towards X; schoolteachers toward Y. This means both have a mixture of formal and informal practice. Put another way – both are facilitators, both are teachers. Much of the work of youth workers, for example, will be around conversation (a). However, they will also be running small projects and groups, perhaps organizing residencies (b). Here they may sit down with those involved and talk through the programme. They decide together what they will do – they negotiate a curriculum. Workers may also be interested in water-sports. Here they may well organize a course on safety – where they decide the content and the process (c) (Jeffs and Smith 1999).

Educators that are largely working around conversation can be seen as informal, those working through set curricula are formal. It could be argued that those largely working with negotiated curricula are either engaged in non-formal because of the ‘bottom up’ approach to planning content and process (following Fordham [1995]) or in some form of self-education.

One of the interesting features of this simple model is that it can be applied to self-education and [self-directed learning](#). These terms tend to be used interchangeably – although the latter has gained significantly in popularity in the last decade or so. However, they are different. While both are concerned with conscious attempts to learn, self-education also carries with it a commitment to certain values like respect for others, the search for truth and so on. Self-directed learning need not. If we think in terms of the above model, then it can be seen that people might seek to ‘teach themselves’ through conversation, through constructing some sort of learning plan, or by following programmes of learning constructed by others (for example, teaching themselves French via a language course on CD and book).

Conclusion

My basic line of argument here has been that once the obvious point is made that much learning takes place beyond the formal confines of the classroom, then the usefulness of the notion of ‘informal learning’ quickly fades. Part of the reason for this has been the eagerness of policymakers, academics and practitioners to substitute the learning for education (lifelong learning rather than lifelong education; adult learning rather than adult education and so on – see [lifelong learning](#)). A focus on learning is important, but when it is at a cost of thinking about education (and the values it carries), then a grievous disservice is done to all involved. Learning is a process that is happening all the time; education involves intention and commitment. Education is a moral enterprise that needs to be judged as to whether it elevates and furthers well-being.

Four key areas of endeavour would appear to merit our sustained attention:

- Exploring tacit knowledge. Much that has been written about informal learning (especially in the workplace) is, perhaps, better approached as the revealing or unearthing of tacit knowledge, or the re-packing of expertise into tacit knowledge. In notions such as ‘situated learning’, reflection on action and skill acquisition (after Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986) we have some suggestive possibilities. These fundamental processes require our attention.
- Supporting self-education. The development of a range of accessible and usable opportunities for self-education is an obvious implication for policy and practice. Perhaps the most significant aspect here is the need to approach people as both learners and educators. This means moving away from seeing learners as consumers of different packages and opportunities, into viewing them as creators and constructors of learning. This entails cultivating communities animated by dialogue, democracy and respect for truth – and seeing education and learning not as individual acts but as an aspect of living together.
- Strengthening associational life. A follow-on from the above, is the need to develop more democratic and elevating forms of group and organizational life. Not only do we need to attend to the significance of situated learning and distributed cognition, we also must look to building relationships and interactions that allow us to flourish and to grow, and to take responsibility for our lives and our part in the world.
- Developing informal education. A further aspect is the need to focus attention on informal education and the place it has alongside formal education. Working with groups and associations, developing local forms of educating and learning, requires a special mix of dispositions, skills and knowledge.

What we can see here is that the discourse around ‘informal learning’ is significant. However, while it opens up some interesting possibilities, for example around tacit learning, it leads away from others. We need to put education back in the equation.

Further reading and references

Coffield, F. (2000) *The Necessity of Informal Learning*, Bristol: The Policy Press. 80 + iv pages. Useful collection of material arising out of ESRC *Learning Society* Programme. Includes Coffield on the significance of informal learning; an excellent piece by Michael Eraut on non-formal learning – implicit learning and tacit knowledge in professional work; Field and Spence on informal learning and social capital; Barron et al on implicit knowledge, phenomenology and learning difficulties; Davies on the impact of accreditation; and Fevre et al on necessary and unnecessary learning.

P. H. Coombs and M. Ahmed (1974) *Attacking Rural Poverty. How non-formal education can help*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. See, also, Coombs, P. H. with Prosser, C. and Ahmed, M. (1973) *New Paths to Learning for Rural Children and Youth*, New York: International Council for Educational Development. There were several reports involving Coombs that popularized the institutional split between informal, formal and non-formal education.

Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think* 2e, New York: D. C. Heath. Classic and highly influential discussion of reflective enquiry, with Dewey's famous five elements: suggestion, problem, hypothesis, reasoning, testing. For a discussion that focuses on learning communities see, J. Dewey (1915) *The School and Society*, 2e., Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Marsick, V. J. and Watkins, K. E. (1991) *Informal and Incidental Learning in the Workplace*, London: Routledge. Interesting exploration of the nature of informal education which is grounded in an examination of a number of specific examples of practice.

References

Batsleer, J. (2008) *Informal Learning in Youth Work*. London: Sage.

Bekerman, Z., N. C. Burbules and D. Silberman Keller (2006) *Learning in Places – the informal education reader*, New York: Peter Lang.

Bentley, T. (1998) *Learning beyond the Classroom: Education for a changing world*, London: Routledge.

Boud, D. and Garrick, J. (eds.) (1999) *Understanding Learning at Work*, London: Routledge.

Cross, Jay (2006) *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways That Inspire Innovation and Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dale, M. and Bell, J. (1999) *Informal Learning in the Workplace. DfEE Research Report 134*, London: Department for Education and Employment. Summary: [DfEE Research – Informal learning in the workplace](#)

Davies, L. (2008) *Informal Learning*. Aldershot: Gower.

Dreyfus, H. L. and Dreyfus, S. E. (1986) *Mind Over Machine. The power of human intuition and expertise in the era of the computer*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Ellis, J. (1990) 'Informal education – a Christian perspective' in T. Jeffs and M. Smith (eds.) *Using Informal Education*, Buckingham: Open University Press. Full text is in the [archives](#).

Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, London: Falmer Press.

Eraut, M. (2000) 'Non-formal learning, implicit learning and tacit knowledge in professional work' in F. Coffield *The Necessity of Informal Learning*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Garrick, J. (1997) *Informal Learning in the Workplace*, London: Routledge.

Green, L. (2008) *Music, Informal Learning and the School. A new classroom pedagogy*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Heath, S. B. (1983) *Ways with Words. Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heath, S. B. and McLaughlin, M. W. (eds.) (1994) *Identity and Inner-City Youth: Beyond ethnicity and gender*, New York: Teachers College Press.

Henze, R. C. (1992) *Informal Teaching and Learning: a study of everyday cognition in a Greek community*, Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Jeffs, T. and Smith, M. (1990) (eds.) *Using Informal Education*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Leadbeater, C. (2000) *Living on Thin Air. The new economy*, London: Penguin.

McGiveney, V. (1999) *Informal Learning in the Community. A trigger for change and development*, Leicester: NIACE. 99 + xii pages. Report of a short DfEE-funded study that focuses on the role of informal learning in 'starting people on a learning pathway'.

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1977) *Learning Opportunities for Adults Vol IV: Participation in Adult Education*, Paris: OECD.

Polanyi, M. (1967) *The Tacit Dimension*, New York: Doubleday.

Reber, A. S. (1993) *Implicit Learning and Tacit Knowledge. An essay on the cognitive unconscious*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Salomon, G. (ed.) (1993) *Distributed Cognition: Psychological and educational considerations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 275 + xxi pages. Fascinating collection of articles exploring debates around distributed cognition.

Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner. How professionals think in action*, London: Temple Smith.

Schön, D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Smith, M. (1988) *Developing Youth Work. Informal education, mutual aid and popular practice*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Smith, M. K. (1994) *Local Education. Community, conversation, action*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Tennant, M. (1997) *Psychology and Adult Learning 2e*, London: Routledge.

<http://infed.org/mobi/informal-learning-theory-practice-and-experience/>

Tennant, M. (1999) 'Is learning transferable?' in D. Boud and J. Garrick (eds.) *Understanding Learning at Work*, London: Routledge.

Tight, M. (1996) *Key Concepts in Adult Education and Training*, London: Routledge.

Links

[DfEE Research – Informal learning in the workplace](#) – summary of Dale and Bell's (1999) study.

[John Ellis – Informal education: a Christian perspective](#)

Acknowledgement: The picture "Shadow Work" is by Tony Hall and is reproduced under a Creative Commons licence (Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 2.0 Generic)- flickr: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/anotherphotograph/3389627948/>

How to cite this piece: Smith, Mark K. (1999, 2008). 'Informal learning', *the encyclopaedia of informal education*. [<http://infed.org/mobi/informal-learning-theory-practice-and-experience/>]. Retrieved: insert date]

© [Mark K. Smith](#) 1999, 2008